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The Psychology Behind 'Just Following Orders'

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Apparently Egil Krogh's defense against charges involving perjury and burglary will be that he was following orders, a defense no more appealing to most of us now that when it was used at Nuremburg.

But those of us who are inclined to make harsh moral judgments, whether of Krogh or of Eichmann, ought to take time out to read The Perils of Obedience, an article in the December issue of Harper's Magazine.

The piece is based on experiments in authority obedience carried out by social psychologist Stanley Milgram at Yale, and might give you some second thoughts about your moral superiority. (The article is adapted from Obedience to Authority, to be published in January by Harper & Row.)

Here's the design of the experiment. Two people, one designated "teacher" and the other "learner," are told that they are a part of a study to determine the effects of punishment on learning. The learner is strapped in a sort of electric chair, and the teacher is seated before an impressive instrument panel which, he is told, can transmit electrical shock to the "learner." The shocks (the teacher is given a sample 45-volt shock just to show that the machine works) are transmitted, in increasing intensity, every time the learner makes an error on a word-association test.

The machine's instrument panel has 30 switches labeled with voltages ranging from 15 to 450, with additional labels describing shock intensities as: Slight Shock, Moderate Shock, Strong Shock, Very Strong Shock, Intense Shock, Extreme Intensity Shock and Danger: Severe Shock.

As Milgram describes it: "The teacher is a genuinely naive subject who has come to the laboratory for the experiment. The learner, or victim, is actually an actor who receives no shock at all. The point of the experiment is to see how far a person will proceed in a concrete and measurable situation in which he is ordered to inflict increasing pain on a protesting victim.

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"Conflict arises when the man receiving the shock begins to show that he is experiencing discomfort. At 75 volts, he grunts; at 120 volts, he complains loudly; at 150, he demands to be released from the experiment. As the voltage increases, his protests become more vehement and emotional. At 285 volts, his response can be described only as an agonized scream. Soon thereafter he makes no sound at all."

One "teacher," a 31-year-old medical technician who had emigrated from Germany, handled herself just as you think you would have. When the intensity got up to 210 volts, she turned to the experimenter and said she thought they should stop.

And despite his most authoritarian manner, she wouldn't go on.

But that was, astonishingly, exceptional. Of 40 subjects in the first experiment, 25 obeyed the experimenter right up to the most powerful shock available.

Someone told Milgram that, because the experiments were done at Yale, the subject might have been more than routinely aggressive. So he tried it again, with a range of subjects from professionals to industrial workers from the New Haven community. The outcome was the same. And it got worse when it was repeated in Princeton, Munich, Rome, South Africa and Australia.

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Nor did the vast majority of the subjects seem to take any pleasure in inflicting pain. While some showed only minimal tension, according to Milgram, many, when the experiment was over, "heaved sighs of relief, mopped their brows, rubbed their fingers over their eyes, or nervously fumbled cigarettes."

Several of the subjects tried to quit the experiment but lost their resolve in the face of the experimenter's firmness—particularly after he assured them that he was responsible for such things as heart attacks or serious injuries.

"Many of the people were in some sense against what they did to the learner, and many protested even while they obeyed," said Milgram, now a professor at City University of New York. But the experiment was constructed in such fashion that it was impossible for a subject to quit without flat defiance. And rather than that, most went along. (The percentage of obedient subjects fell off by two thirds when the orders were given by telephone rather than in person.)

What happens to ordinary people that makes them follow orders they find personally immoral or repugnant?

"The essence of obedience," Milgram concludes, "is that a person comes to view himself as the instrument for carrying out another person's wishes, and he therefore no longer regards himself as responsible for his actions.

"Once this critical shift of viewpoint has occurred, all of the essential features of obedience follow.

"The most far-reaching consequence is that the person feels responsible to the authority directing him but feels no responsibility for the content of the actions that the authority prescribes.

"Morality does not disappear—it acquires a radically different focus: the subordinate person feels shame or pride depending on how adequately he has performed the actions called for by authority."